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ABSTRACT

This documents contains 40 discreet pieces of advice and tips for making English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classes, at whatever level, more interesting and fun for both teacher and learner. It also offers good and shrewd advice for handling the myriad of issues that face the typical ESL teacher--from dealing with the custodial staff at the location of instruction to obtaining further professional development and training lessons and teaching tips. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (KFT)

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40 Helpful Hints & Tips, for Making Your ESL Teaching Easier and More Fun!

Hands-on English

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40 helpful hints & tips, for making your ESL teaching easier and more fun!

This article appeared in the July/August 1994 issue of **Hands-on English**, and was one of our all-time, timeless hits! It includes tips from many different teachers. We're including the article here because it is so useful, and hope that you will find it inspiring.

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1 Join a professional organization

Teaching can be a lonely occupation. Connect yourself to a network of people who do what you do and who share your concerns. You'll usually receive newsletters and reduced fees at conferences as a benefit. But consider joining also as a way of lending strength to an organization that can speak up on behalf of immigrants' rights and educators' concerns!

TESOL is the international organization for ESL/EFL teachers with over 20,000 members. (Call 703-836-0774 for information, or go to their website http://www.tesol.edu). There are dozens of smaller, regional TESOL affiliates that you can join as well --your state probably has its own affiliate. And there are other organizations that might relate to the kind of work you do, so keep looking until you get connected!

2 Attend work shops and conferences

Even if you haven't joined an organization, you can still go to conferences, and there's no better way to meet fellow teachers, get some inspiring ideas and see ESL books and materials on exhibit. (Note: if you only want to see the book exhibit, some larger conferences will sell you an exhibit pass for a reduced fee.)

If you can't make it to a conference, try at least to attend some teachers' workshops. Most school districts and community colleges offer training sessions or workshops you can attend. But don't limit yourself just to ESL! You can get good teaching ideas from other areas as well.

3 Start your own support group

Find some fellow instructors who are willing to meet occasionally or have lunch together for the purpose of exchanging thoughts and ideas. A long-term relationship with other teachers can be very beneficial! The members of your group don't have to be from the same school--in fact it some times works better if they are not.

4 Get online

If you have access to the Internet through work or through a commercial e-mail service, sign up for some discussion groups, called "lists." One that we know about is called TESL-L, which provides an opportunity to talk with thousands of ESL professionals internationally. To sign up for this list, go to http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/~tesl-l/ You'll find information on what to do next.

A note of caution: This form of communication is addictive and can take up a lot of your time! You may want to get started during a school break.

5 Get a pile of catalogs

Finding just the right ESL materials for your students can sometimes be a challenge! Get yourself on the mailing list with lots of different publishers so you'll receive their ESL catalogs. You'll find it useful to have a library of catalogs to browse through when you need to.

Start with Addison-Wesley, Heinle & Heinle, Oxford University Press and Regents-Prentice Hall, but also seek out the smaller companies, as they often have great materials. And don't overlook literacy organizations as a source for materials --New Readers Press (Laubach) and Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) both have extensive catalogs.

Note: Hands-on English published an updated list of ESL publishers and their addresses in the July/August 1997 issue (Vol. 7, No. 2).

6 Get book distributors' catalogs

To get your hands on ESL materials quickly, sometimes it's best to call a book distributor such as DELTA in Illinois (1-800-323-8270), ALTA in California (1-800-ALTA/ESL) or BOOKLINK in New Jersey (201-947-3471). They carry books from many different publishers (although not all) and can usually ship you your order in a couple of days.

7 Get examination copies

Many publishers offer "examination copies" of certain titles to teachers who might be adopting a text for their classes. You usually must submit your request for these on school letterhead; see individual publishers' catalogs for details.

8 Make friends with a librarian

Start a steady relationship with a librarian, either at your institution or at a public library. These people are amazing in terms of what they can find out for you and the services they can provide for your students!

Tell them the kinds of things you are interested in or that you are looking for, and then stop in once a week (with cookies) to pick their brains. You won't regret it.

9 Make friends with the secretarial staff

If you are lucky enough to have secretarial help where you work, they are likely to be overworked and very unappreciated. However, they can provide vital help and information to you and your students, so treat them well and bring cookies.

10 Make friends with a custodian

The other truly powerful person at your school, who can really help you when you need it, is the custodian. Sue Sandeen recommends you get to know the custodial staff before Day One, and again, remember them with cookies.

11 Get a business card

Why is it that so few teachers have business cards? Give yourself a self-esteem boost and order some. They are usually around $25 for a box of 500. This will make it easier for you to network when you go to conferences and meetings.

If you don't have a fancy title, you still deserve a business card! One card we saw said simply: "Bill Smith, Teacher" with the home address and phone number below. Another one we've seen said: "Susan Jones, English as a Second Language In Instructor." Volunteer tutors can often get business cards with the logo of their organization printed on them. This is a great way to introduce yourself as well as to spread the word about your agency.

12 Enroll in a foreign language class

Put yourself in the position of a student and learn what it feels like to struggle with a new language. This experience will improve your teaching in both large and small ways. And by the way, this exercise is worth repeating every few years--even if you already speak a foreign language, you've probably forgotten what it felt like when you started.

13 Keep a private teaching journal

This might sound like extra work, but if you keep a record of what works with your students and what doesn't, you'll find it invaluable in future years when looking for ideas.

We recently looked through some old lesson-plan books and found comments we'd written like "Great lesson!" and "Terrible day" to be extremely unhelpful. Take the extra time to write down what exactly you did and what the students' response was. (This exercise will help you prepare for the next day's lesson at the same time, by reflecting on what has happened so far.)

14 Organize lessons by topic

Adult programs can be especially chaotic. One very effective way to organize what the students are learning is by topics, which the students themselves can determine. Within one topic (whether it's grocery shopping or world peace) there is plenty of room for adjusting to different students' levels and for offering help in all the skill areas the students might need (such as reading, pronunciation, spelling, fluency, etc.) This will be more cohesive from the students' point of view than a series of unrelated

language activities.

15 Adopt a textbook series

If your program needs even more structure,.Shirley Ostler recommends your program adopt a graded series of ESL texts. The benefit of this is that everybody can clearly see progress, and when students miss a class they can see what they've missed in the book. Many students understandably prefer to have the security of a textbook they can take home and look at or study from. Lesson planning is a little easier when such a text is in place, and yet there is still room for supplementing the material with other creative activities.

16 Always give clear guidelines

When teaching a course, Fiona Savage says one should always give clear guidelines to students at the beginning. These should include not only what course work is expected from students, but also the teacher's expectations as to attendance, punctuality, homework, etc. This will help prevent misunderstandings and problems later.

17 Always have a lesson plan

There is nothing worse than being unprepared, says Michele Bowman. Some people may be able to do lessons "off the cuff" after years of teaching --however, even these people probably have some kind of lesson plan jotted down some where.

18 Always have a backup plan

You never know what's going to go wrong and when, especially in adult programs! Fiona Savage suggests always having a spare exercise or language game up your sleeve. She also suggests preparing more materials than you strictly need for a lesson, as it is sometimes unpredictable how fast a class will work from day to day.

Rick Rosenberg keeps a short-duration activity file on hand at all times, for this reason. His file includes two lists of riddles and answers (students memorize one part and move around the room to find the person with the matching riddle or answer). He also keeps a password-like game called "Just-a-Minute" (by Elizabeth Claire) handy, with his own adaptation of it with vocabulary the class is working on, and a packet of short interesting articles about topics of interest to students.

He keeps this file on hand to reinforce the language or activities of the class, or as something to fall back on if he sees the students want a break or a change of pace.

19 Use real language

Have students study the language that is going on around them. Janice Higdon has her students take Walkman-type tape recorders with them to the workplace, stores, restaurants, etc. and bring language samples into class to study. She also has them bring in written items or forms which they must work with in their jobs or with government agencies.

Using the language the students find, she develops situations for role-playing about restaurants, stores, banks or other business and social situations.

20 Invest in 3x5 cards

There are millions of language activities you can do with plain 3x5 cards. Emily Thrush says she could happily teach English with nothing more than these cards and some markers or pens!

Some of their uses include: flash cards, concentration games, matching games, word order practice, pair work, information-gap activities, and on and on and on. (Pro Lingua Associates has two books with detailed descriptions of card activities--Index Card Games, and More Index Card Games.)

21 Save time by photocopying less

We need to think about saving time and resources in preparing for classes. Abbie Tom points out that one way to do this is to avoid photocopying as much as possible. Instead of copying ten exercises, copy one and think of ten activities you can do with it! Also use dictations in class and newsprint sheets as alternatives to copying.

22 Milk every activity to its fullest

This suggestion is both a time-saver and good pedagogy. Barbara Gottschalk has seen many teachers rush from worksheet to worksheet and textbook to textbook, wearing out themselves and the copy machine in the process! It's sounder teaching practice to fully expand on each item you present.

Here is a check list of questions which Barbara suggests we ask, for example about a story the students have read: Have they talked about it? Have they talked to each other about it? Have they written about it? Have they written about what some one else said about it? Have they read what other students have written about it? Have they done a dictation about it for listening practice? The repetition such activities provide is very important for language learning.

23 Explain the purpose of activities

Adults work better when they know why they are being asked to do something in a certain way. Fiona Savage points out that it's important to include students in your reasons for doing things--not necessarily for everything but at least from time to time. Particularly if students are resistant to the way you are doing something, it is helpful to explain the learning principles behind the method.

24 Reduce teacher talk

Pay attention to the percentage of class time devoted to your speech. Only at the very lowest language levels should you be talking more than your students.

25 Create a community

'Turning the class room into a community of learners' is a phrase we've heard before but may not know how to realize. Joy Kreeft Peyton, National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education (NCLE), says that in a classroom community, everyone has responsibility for seeing that learning happens. This may be hard to achieve at first, but a very helpful book with some guidelines is: The Different Drum : Community Making and Peace by M. Scott Peck (1987 Simon & Shuster).

26 End with success

End every class with a sense of accomplishment, says Sue Sandeen. It's also nice to end with a laugh, or with a game. If possible, say goodbye to each student by name.

27 Have students write you a letter

To find out if students are learning, not getting lost and whether they understand what is going on, institute a regular feedback writing, suggests Susan Simon. Ask the students to write you a letter about what they've learned, what they are confused about, and what they still want to know. Students love getting a personal response, and it is well worth the time.

28 Write dialogue journals with your students

An expanded version of the above suggestion is an actual journal which each student keeps and which you respond to regularly in writing. Using dialogue journals to write back and forth with your students can keep you in touch with what they are really thinking underneath all that classroom talk. (For examples of this technique, see Writing Our Lives: Reflections on Dialogue Journal Writing with Adults Learning English, Joy Kreeft Peyton & Jana Staton, Eds., 1991 Prentice Hall Regents.)

29 Teacher movement

When you present something to students, be aware of your movement, which can convey a lot of meaning. Movement includes your posture, gestures, expressions and appearance, as well as visual aids both planned and unplanned. Karen Camp bell reports that research has shown that 60% of the impact of a presentation is due to movement, 30% due to voice and only 10% due to words.

30 Use "right brain" activities, too

Try to incorporate rhythm, music, drawing, imagination and visualization into your lessons.

For example, Karen Campbell uses an incomplete picture (two wavy lines) which her students have to expand into a picture of something, then write about. Lloyd Rogers likes to invent simple jazz chants suitable for his students or a special occasion. And Shirley Ostler urges us to "sing, sing, sing." Students love it, and it reinforces English intonation patterns and sounds, much as the jazz chants do.

31 Stories with holes

To encourage imaginative thinking, Michael Babayco reads incomplete stories to his students, or little-known fairy tales without the ending. Students have to try to figure out the rest of the story by asking probing questions. Sometimes the activity is done with only "yes" or "no" questions.

32 BINGO games

Lots of teachers have used Bingo games to reinforce language. With her beginning students, Helen V. Jones uses a variation that has AEIOU for the letters. The students get practice in distinguishing the vowel sounds and the numbers (such as sixteen and sixty) in an enjoyable game.

33 Unscramble the letters

As an end-of-class activity, Richard Taylor has a word game that is better than Hangman. He writes a scrambled word on the board (for example, the word 'secretary'). The students try to see how many one-letter words, two-letter words, three-letter words, etc. they can find. They can do this in groups or as a whole class. Can any one (besides the instructor) use all the letters to make one word? This is a good vocabulary builder and can last from 5 to 45 minutes.

34 Question cards

Another filler activity comes from Michael Babayco, who keeps a recipe card box filled with 3x5 cards handy. On these cards he has written a variety of questions that are appropriate to challenge the students' thinking or knowledge. Whenever he has a few minutes, he picks a card and reads it to see who can answer first. As cards get recycled, students get reinforcement.

35 Back-to-back

To encourage use of descriptive words, Michael has 2 students sit back-to-back. One is given a picture of abstract shapes, the other a blank page and a pencil. The first student must describe the shapes, their sizes and their location on the page so the other student can make a drawing that will match as closely as possible to the original. (Tip: For some prepared drawings for this activity, see Talk-A-Tivities by Richard Yorkey (Addison-Wesley).

36 Jokes

Humor is one of the hardest things to share with ESL students, but they love to learn about it. Richard Taylor says he's had good luck with jokes from 8-year olds! For example, "There were thirty sick sheep and ten escaped--how many were left?" (Note: Richard didn't tell us the punchline to this joke, so you'll have to ask an 8-year-old.)

If you can find some 8-year olds to supply you with more jokes, you'll have lots of good teaching material!

37 Guessing game

To review vocabulary, play a "yes"/"no" game, a variation on Twenty Questions. The teacher (or a student) thinks of a word. Other students ask, "Is it _____?" to which the answer can be only "yes" or "no." Sharon Hennessy says this provides lots of fun pattern practice.

38 Vocabulary expansion

When presenting a new word, give not only its immediate meaning but expand on its uses as well. Jim Duber suggests when presenting a verb, always to indicate the prepositions it can take and the different meanings this results in. When presenting a noun, always include an article (a or an) and the term used for counting multiples of the noun, for example: a letter, lots of letters=mail.

Also give real-life examples of how we use this vocabulary.

39 "S" on a stick

Most ESL students have trouble at one stage of their learning remembering to use the 3rd person singular "s" at the end of verbs. Esther Robbins has a clever way to get the students to self-correct this error --she has a large cardboard "S" mounted on a popsicle stick, which she keeps in her briefcase. If the error occurs, she silently holds up the "S" as a reminder. Sometimes she will ask a student to pass the "S" to the one who needs it.

40 Oral history questionnaires

For discussion topics in class, Judith Snoke reports that she's had very good luck with the "Southern Oral History Questionnaire" from the Department of History, UNC/Chapel Hill.

Some of the amazingly effective questions, she says, include: describe the house you grew up in or the home of someone you loved; describe a meal at your childhood home--who is at the table, what do you eat, who serves, who eats first, who shops, who cooks and who cleans up; where do family members sleep, who do they sleep with; what is the naughtiest thing you can remember doing; who supported the family, what kinds of jobs did family members have?

Most libraries have some information on oral history--ask your librarian to help you find similar materials.

Bonus tip-- 41 A reading journal

Encourage students to read by having them keep a journal of what they're reading and what they think about it, suggests Nicole Keshav. This can work for students at many different levels.

Do you have ESL hints & tips you'd like to share with our readers? If so, **Hands-on English** wants to hear from you! Send us your description of something that's worked for you and we may include it in a future issue. Email to the editor at: editor@handsonenglish.com

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